

STAT

ARTICLE APPEARED
ON PAGE A22THE WASHINGTON POST
7 January 1982*Robert J. McCloskey***'It Is Unfair to the Ambassador'**

The American ambassador to Peru, Frank Ortiz, has had what he would describe as a bad trip with this newspaper going back to last September after having been nominated for the embassy in Lima. In the time since, he has had correspondence with the publisher, the managing editor and the assistant managing editor for foreign news.

His grievance grows out of a Washington Post story from Lima published here Sept. 13. The story was prompted by critical public comment there a few months earlier to word of his nomination. At issue is the way the story deals with two allegations that arose during a previous tour of duty Ortiz had in Lima beginning in 1967: that he worked for the CIA and, as a result, was forced to leave Peru before completing his assignment.

The story's lead said: "The Reagan administration has caused a minor outcry in the Peruvian press by nominating as ambassador to Lima a diplomat who reportedly cut short an earlier tour of duty here after allegations linking him to the Central Intelligence Agency." The charge, by way of background, surfaced in a communist weekly in October 1969, when Ortiz was the embassy's political counselor and when the expropriation of a large American oil company had become a public issue.

In the third paragraph, The Post's story said, "according to two former government officials who were close confidants of then-president Juan Velasco Alvarado certain rumors . . . led Velasco to believe that Ortiz was working with the CIA. As a result, these officials say, Velasco called the U.S. Embassy to ask that Ortiz be removed from his position."

There is no evidence that Velasco personally intervened. Both Ortiz and former U.S. ambassador to Peru Taylor Belcher acknowledge that the charge was raised and that Ortiz's

The fourth paragraph of The Post's story is at best confusing. "Diplomatic officials in the U.S. Embassy, according to these former Peruvian officials and versions of the story that circulated at the time, asked that Ortiz's departure be delayed long enough to allow him to leave quietly, with no in-

Ombudsman

ternational fuss. Three months later, Ortiz left his Peru post and became deputy chief of mission in Uruguay. The CIA allegations were never proved, and both Peruvian-Foreign Ministry officials and some U.S. diplomats now say there was nothing irregular about Ortiz's departure."

The last statement is supported by a comment attributed to a U.S. diplomat. Yet, the earlier flat statement that Ortiz left three months later is unsupported and contrary to the facts. Ortiz did not depart until the following July, almost seven months after the issue had arisen. Belcher confirms this.

The Post's story quotes different Peruvian sources critical of Ortiz's nomination now as ambassador and has the effect of reopening the allegations. The editor of a "pro-government" news magazine is quoted: "It's a show of arrogance, I think . . . saying, 'You kicked this guy out, more or less.' Now he comes back as ambassador." Separately, a "leftist" newspaper is quoted as saying Ortiz was "expelled from Peru . . . for being a CIA agent." Two others, "former associates of President Velasco," are quoted extensively describing "the same version of events"—that Velasco "began to suspect Ortiz of CIA links" and, again, that Velasco was prompted "to ask that Ortiz leave the country."

An incumbent Peruvian foreign ministry official is quoted next saying, "The important thing is that they never found a single element of proof . . . he's [Ortiz] been accused simply by rumors. . . . At that time there was a xenophobia against everything American. . . . the CIA was all over South America. It was very easy to accuse an American citizen, but very hard to prove."

Then, the story returns to one of the identified critics: "Let's suppose there was nothing, and there was just a scandal. This is a guy who isn't going to help relations between our countries. . . . He's a man who's been questioned. . . . It seems like a kind of vendetta on the part of the United States."

The remainder of the story contains the "official U.S. response": Ortiz is well qualified; he speaks fluent Spanish; he is the highest ranking Hispanic in the Foreign Service; he has held eight diplomatic positions related to Latin America. Also, there is a personal tribute from his predecessor without reference to the questions raised in the story.

Two specific complaints Ortiz makes are that The Post made no effort to reach him for comment before publication and that it ignored the following public statement by the current president of Peru, Fernando Belaunde Terry, on Aug. 22: "Such accusations are completely unfounded. We have conducted an in-depth investigation. Mr. Ortiz was a member of the embassy here and acted very correctly."

In support of the story, the reporter says that it was suggested by the foreign desk and that in Lima she talked with both Americans and Peruvians in the interest of balance. For official Peruvian comment, she was referred to the Foreign Ministry and was not informed of President Belaunde's statement. She confirmed that no effort was made to reach Ortiz in Washington. The assistant managing editor for foreign news defended the story as accurately describing media reaction in Lima to Ortiz's appointment and for including a denial by an embassy official that Ortiz's earlier tour had been cut short.

The conclusion here is that, while the story strives for balance, it doesn't succeed. The net effect is that it is unfair to the ambassador and, in an important way, justifies a deeper concern of his: that the rehashing of an old and disproved charge that he was a covert agent of U.S. intelligence adds jeopardy to his mission. This is a genuine concern of all American diplomats serving abroad today. The newspaper's judgment of what was new news in this instance was misplaced.

departure was requested in a meeting Belcher had with the then-foreign minister on Nov. 17, 1969. Belcher confirms Ortiz's statement to The Post that "the falseness of the charges was easily proven" and that "my tour of duty thereafter was unaffected" and "on the last night in Lima my wife and I were guests of President and Mrs. Velasco at the